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Belarus: Anti-semitic nationalist organizations in Belarus and the availability of state protection to their victims

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Nationalist Anti-Semitic Organizations and Groups

A report published by Tel Aviv University's Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism states that the number of extremist groups has decreased under the Lukashenko regime as a result of its repression of "all movements not to its taste" (Stephen Roth Institute 2001). However, various sources consulted by the Research Directorate indicate that there are still several anti-Semitic nationalist organizations active in Belarus (ICNL 4 Feb. 2004; Stephen Roth Institute 2001).

The Russian National Unity (RNU), one of the largest Russian neo-Nazi organizations (World Jewish Congress Dec. 2004) and the main anti-Semitic nationalist group in Belarus (UCSJ 23 Nov. 2005), has local branches in Minsk, Grodno, Gomel, Vitebsk, Polotsk, and other Belarusian cities (Stephen Roth Institute 2004b; US 5 Jan. 2005, Sec. 6). In January 2004, RNU members distributed anti-Semitic leaflets on city buses in Gomel (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 3; *FSU Monitor* 10 Mar. 2004). These leaflets stated, "The Jews are trying to destroy Christianity," "The Jews are the forces of evil," "Now hostile activities against the Jews will begin," and "The fighters against God must be exterminated" (US 5 Jan. 2005, Sec. 6). In the same month, RNU graffiti appeared on the walls of Jewish community centres in Gomel (*ibid.*; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 3; *FSU Monitor* 10 Mar. 2004) and Polotsk (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 3). There were no arrests made in connection with these activities (*ibid.*). According to a member of the Belarusian Popular Front,

"[a]t the time when [the authorities] (insertion in original) are seeking to destroy independent Belarusian organizations, nobody pays any attention to the [RNU].... They openly paste their leaflets in public places and openly gather in the city center every Sunday" (RFE/RL 16 June 2005).

Other nationalist anti-Semitic organizations operative in Belarus include the Belarus branch of the Russian extremist National Bolshevik Party (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, Sec. 3), "Krai" (country) and "Belyi Legion" (White Legion) (ICNL 4 Feb. 2004; Stephen Roth Institute 2001). The Belarus People's Patriot Movement; the Freedom Party; the Belarus branch of the Russian

Liberal Democratic Party (LDPB); and the Right Revanche were also identified as extremist anti-Semitic groups (ibid.). There was no information provided on the activities of these groups in the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In March 2004, a Website of the "Jewish Orthodox Skinheads" was created (*FSU Monitor* 7 July 2004; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 3). Although the organization's stated goals were to combat anti-Semitism and xenophobia, information on the site encouraged anti-Semitic activities including the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and arson attacks on Jewish buildings and synagogues (*FSU Monitor* 7 July 2004; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 3).

Materials consulted by the Research Directorate also make reference to "neo-Nazi youth organizations" (WJC Dec. 2004; Stephen Roth Institute 2004a) and "skinheads" (WJC Dec. 2004; Stephen Roth Institute 2004b; US Jan. 5 2005, Sec. 6) that are active in Belarus.

State Actions

Actions of government officials in Belarus have been described as reflecting a "lack of sensitivity to the Jewish community" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). In 2003, the reconstruction of a sports stadium in Grodno built on a former Jewish cemetery led to the discovery of human remains (WJC Dec. 2004; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). Although authorities promised to remove the remains from the construction site for reburial, the remains were later found piled in a ravine (WJC Dec. 2004) and in dump trucks mixed with earth for resurfacing a road (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2).

In February 2004, the authorities shut down the International Humanitarian Institute, the only institution of higher education in Belarus offering studies in Judaica (ibid.; *FSU Monitor* 23 July 2004). In September 2004, the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union was denied registration for allegedly submitting documents late (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; *Bigotry Monitor* 10 Sept. 2004). According to the organization's Director of International Bureaus, the

"Belarusian government doesn't like reports of antisemitic activity reaching the outside world and, instead of taking steps to correct the problem, they're going after the messenger" (ibid.).

Anti-Semitic and xenophobic literature is sold openly in Belarus, through the Belarusian Orthodox Church and other organizations, despite the government's "assurances" that the sale of such literature is illegal (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; *Bigotry Monitor* 18 Mar. 2005). According to one source, "prosecutors have been reluctant to enforce hate speech laws against anti-Semitic authors, some of whom have close ties to the government" (*FSU Monitor* 15 Apr. 2005).

Since 1990, no trial related to neo-Nazi graffiti, or the vandalism of cemeteries or synagogues has been held in Belarus (Stephen Roth Institute 2004b; World Jewish Congress Dec. 2004; US 5 Jan. 2005, Sec. 6). Commenting on recent xenophobic and anti-Semitic events, the first deputy chairman of the

Union of Belarusian Jewish Associations and Communities stated that these actions "are becoming increasingly neo-Nazi in nature, while the authorities are continuing to behave as if this phenomenon does not exist in Belarus" (Belapan 14 Mar. 2005). According to the director of the same organization, "[t]he Jewish population [in Belarus] is not safe" and the Belarusian authorities could "very easily decrease the level of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, if only they were willing to do so" (*Bigotry Monitor* 16 Apr. 2004).

According to the Research and Advocacy Director of UCSJ's Washington, DC office, the nationalistic anti-Semitic RNU

"seems to have received semi-official protection from the government in the recent past, since its members attack Belarusian oppositionists just as often as they attack ethnic minorities. The government sometimes arrests RNU members, but more often than not leaves them alone" (UCSJ 23 Nov. 2005).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), European Country of Origin Information Network, Forum 18, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, The Virtual Guide to Belarus.

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